



Are Reports of Child Abuse among U.S. Parents with Disabilities More Likely to Be Substantiated?

Liz Lightfoot, Mingyang Zheng, and Sharyn DeZelar · April 2021

Background

Parents with disabilities are no more likely than other parents to abuse or neglect their children, but they are disproportionately more likely to interact with the child-protection system than their nondisabled counterparts. The beliefs of mandated reporters, such as teachers and doctors, about the inability of people with disabilities to raise children, have contributed to this overrepresentation. There is, however, very little research that has examined how often child-protection cases involving parents with disabilities are substantiated. (Substantiated child-protection cases have enough evidence to be investigated, but they may or may not result in charges of abuse.)

Findings

After accounting for other contributors, including financial problems and unstable housing, the odds were higher that abuse would be substantiated in cases if the caregiver had a disability compared with cases without a caregiver disability. In the total sample, 27% of cases were substantiated. About 10% of cases in which abuse was substantiated involved a parent with a disability, even though only 7% of cases in this study included a parent with a disability.

Abuse was also more likely to be substantiated in poor families, including those that used public benefits. Inadequate housing, too, was associated with higher substantiation rates.

Implications

Many studies have found that parents with disabilities face discriminatory attitudes by child-welfare professionals (National Council on

Disability, 2012), and that child-welfare workers often have little training on working with parents with disabilities (LaLiberte, 2013). Bias in the child-welfare system is one explanation for higher substantiation rates; training for child-welfare professionals can mitigate this (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015).

In this study, one-tenth of substantiated maltreatment cases involved a parent with a disability. This alone suggests that the child-welfare system should follow federal antidiscrimination laws and provide parents with disabilities with the services they need.

Also, given the higher rates of substantiation of cases involving a parent with a disability, researchers, policymakers, and service providers must explore and address this disparity. There is no evidence that parents with disabilities are more likely to abuse or neglect their children. One explanation for higher substantiation rates is the bias parents with disabilities experience within the child welfare system (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2015). Training for professionals within the system may address this bias, too.

Methods

This study used the 2014 National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System Child File data set, obtained from the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect at Cornell University. The sample for this study consisted of 516,849 cases representing eight states: Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, South Dakota, Texas, and Utah. We selected these states because they had fewer missing data points.

We compared rates of substantiated cases between parents with and without disabilities, and among



parents with different types of disability. They also accounted for child characteristics, including gender, race, and ethnicity, and risk factors such as inadequate housing, financial problems, and the use of public benefits.

STATES SURVEYED

Georgia, Indiana, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Jersey, South Dakota, Texas, Utah







For a caregiver with an emotional disturbance, the odds for substantiation were 63% higher when compared to a caregiver without an emotional disturbance. Likewise, the odds of substantiation were 35% higher for a caretaker with a learning disability; 23% higher for a caretaker with a physical disability; 44% higher for a parent with a developmental disability; 27% higher for other medical conditions; and 38% higher for multiple disabilities.

How to Cite This Brief

Liz Lightfoot, Mingyang Zheng, and Sharyn DeZelar (2021). Are Reports of Child Abuse among Parents with Disabilities More Likely to Be Substantiated? National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities. Brandeis University, Waltham, MA.

Contact Us

-  heller.brandeis.edu/parents-with-disabilities
-  @NatRCPD
-  facebook.com/nrcpd
-  centerforparents@brandeis.edu

DISCLAIMER: The contents of this brief were developed under a grant from the National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR grant number 90DPGE0001). NIDILRR is a Center within the Administration for Community Living (ACL), Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents of this brief do not necessarily represent the policy of NIDILRR, ACL, or HHS, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.